

Preservationists Try to Bar Demolition of 87-Room Mansion on Long Island

By Corey Kilgannon

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NORTH HILLS, N.Y. — On the grounds outside the mansion, it looked like the aftermath of a raucous Gatsby-era party: a Wurlitzer baby grand piano lay on its side in the grass, with its legs piled alongside.

Inside the mansion it looked as if all parties — and anything else that had taken place in the mansion since the Jazz Age — were most certainly over. Movers had carted away just about everything from the 87-room, Elizabethan-Tudor-style mansion, which was designed by John Torrey Windrim and completed in 1920 for Nicholas F. Brady, an industrialist who was the head of numerous utility companies.

It was named Inisfada — Gaelic for Long Island — and it was one of the grandest of the Gold Coast mansions on Long Island’s North Shore, with 37 fancifully decorated chimneys, stately slate roofs and a facade decorated with scenes from fairy tales. It served as the summer residence for Mr. Brady and his wife, Genevieve, who never had children. After her husband’s death, she donated the home in 1937 to the New York Province of the Society of Jesus, the local branch of the Jesuits, which turned it into a seminary and later the Saint Ignatius Retreat House.

But now, local civic groups fear that the building faces demolition. Inisfada and its 33 overgrown acres were listed for sale last year for \$49 million. The Jesuits are on the verge of closing a deal with a developer from Hong Kong who some preservationists fear will knock down the building as part of a plan to create a gated community of luxury homes, said Richard Bentley, president of the Council of Greater Manhasset Civic Associations, which is mounting a grass-roots campaign to save the mansion.

It is unclear what the developer intends to do, since neither the Jesuits nor the buyers have addressed the issue publicly, but Mr. Bentley said he was under the impression that the developer’s plans did not include keeping the structure, because “They could avoid all this opposition and bad press by simply saying they’re preserving it.”

Local preservationists say they have had limited conversations about the sale with Jesuit officials, who have in recent weeks stopped discussing the sale entirely. The church has not disclosed the identity of the buyer or the buyer’s plans, Mr. Bentley said. “Now they’re keeping the whole thing behind a veil of secrecy,” Mr. Bentley said.

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The only local officials communicating with the Jesuits and the developer are from North Hills, a Nassau County village that would have to grant the developer building and demolition permits.

Mr. Bentley accused the village's leadership of failing to push for the preservation of the mansion, for fear of shaking up a deal that could generate extra property-tax revenue.



Inisfada, built on Long Island's North Shore in 1919, was donated to the Jesuits and for decades had been the St. Ignatius Retreat House. The Tudor-style mansion and its 33 acres were offered for sale at \$49 million last year, and the Jesuits are nearing a sale.

Phil Marino for The New York Times

Referring to the new movie of “The Great Gatsby,” he said: “While the rest of the country is celebrating the era of ‘The Great Gatsby’ and the Long Island Gold Coast mansions and lifestyles, the Village of North Hills is throwing this mansion to the potential wrecking ball.”

“They’ll get their 30 silver pieces,” Mr. Bentley said of the village.

But the mayor of North Hills, Marvin Natiss, said the village was hardly desperate for tax revenue. Regarding Mr. Bentley’s contention that the mansion was worth preserving, Mayor Natiss said, “That’s his opinion, that it’s a piece of history.”

The buyers of the property, he said, will decide the mansion’s fate. “If they want to preserve it, they can,” he said. “If they don’t want to preserve it, that’s their right. Whatever they’re allowed to do, they can do.”

During a meeting with Jesuit officials and lawyers for the buyer, Mr. Natiss said he was told that they could not disclose the buyer’s identity because of the terms of the sale contract. He told the lawyers that the zoning for the property allowed for one home per

half acre. “If the Jesuits wanted to preserve it, don’t you think they would have come to me and said, ‘We want to preserve it’?” Mr. Natiss said.

Efforts are already under way to remove part of the mansion — the St. Genevieve Chapel on its second floor. The chapel has been dismantled for eventual reconstruction on Fordham University’s campus in the Bronx. Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who later became Pope Pius XII, prayed in the chapel while living briefly at the mansion during a 1936 trip to the United States. The retreat house was open to the public for many events, including regular Sunday Masses.

Mr. Bentley said his group had contacted the Vatican hoping to influence the sale, but had not gotten a response. He said he was troubled after learning from a Jesuit staff member at the mansion that demolition companies had been visiting the home. A message left on the staff member’s voice mail was not answered.

Mr. Bentley’s group is trying to get the mansion designated as a state and federal landmark, but without the owner’s support the process has been difficult. He said his group had been searching for documents the Brady family used in handing the property over to the Jesuits.

“When it was donated to the Jesuits, there was an expectation that the mansion would be preserved,” he said. “They have an ethical responsibility to preserve this historic jewel given to them to protect.”

But at least one descendant of Mr. Brady, Nicholas F. Brady, a grandnephew and namesake who was secretary of the treasury from 1988 to 1993, supported the Jesuits’ decision. “My great-uncle wanted his benefaction to help the work of the Jesuits,” he said, “and, in the very different circumstances of today’s world, the Jesuits are the best judge of what will be of help to them.”

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